BIOGRAPHY

HERBERT STANLEY BIRKETT
C.B. (Mil.), LL.D., M.D., C.M., of Montreal

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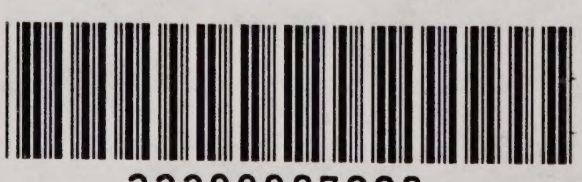
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HERBERT STANLEY BIRKETT

C.B.(Mil.), LL.D., M.D., C.M., of Montreal,

Died on July 19, 1942.

Dr. Birkett was blessed with health, success, a long life, and a devoted family. He had the rare good fortune of celebrating his Golden Jubilee in Otolaryngology while still in active and vigorous practice. The occasion was suitably recognized by his confrères in 1939. His longevity was inherited; his father lived to the age of 76; his mother died two weeks before her 103rd birthday. Dr. Birkett was born on July 17, 1864 in Hamilton, Ont., the son of William Birkett, a merchant. He received his education from 1874 to 1881 at Forest House School, Chester, England, a fact of which he was always proud. He studied Medicine at McGill University and graduated in 1886 with honours, before the age of twenty-two, taking the Holmes Gold Medal for the highest marks throughout the whole four years. He was Senior House Surgeon for a year at the Montreal General Hospital, and after some months spent in general practice in Montreal, he went abroad to specialize in Otolaryngology.

At McGill he studied under such men as Buller, Palmer Howard, Osler, Ross and Shepherd. He always valued his experience in the Anatomy Room with Shepherd where he served as Demonstrator and then Lecturer for ten years. He was a member of the American Association of Anatomists. During his two and a half years special training in England and Europe, he worked under Professors Politzer, Chiari, von Schroetter and Schnitzler in Austria; under Professors Hartmann, Fraenkel and Kraus in Berlin; under Professor Fauvell in Paris; and in London at the Golden Square Hospital under such men as Greville MacDonald, Bond, Mark Hovell and Morell MacKenzie. He spent some time at the Royal Ophthalmic Hospital, London. On his return to Montreal, he became associated in practice with Dr. Buller, who according to the custom of the time, practised Otology as well as Ophthalmology. At the outset, Dr. Birkett assisted Dr. Buller with refractions, etc., but after a time Dr. Buller practised Ophthalmology more exclusively and Dr. Birkett Otolaryngology.

Having thus outlined Dr. Birkett's training, it is interesting to speculate as to what other factors contributed to his extraordinary success. He settled in Montreal away from family influence. As a student he was organist at St. Mark's Church, Hamilton, and later at St. George's Church, Montreal. He was born great, but it was a greatness of the soul. He rose to the top steadily and surely, but entirely through his own unaided efforts. Someone has defined genius as "an infinite capacity for taking pains". Dr. Birkett fulfilled this definition to the letter. No detail was too small for his repeated consideration. After twenty

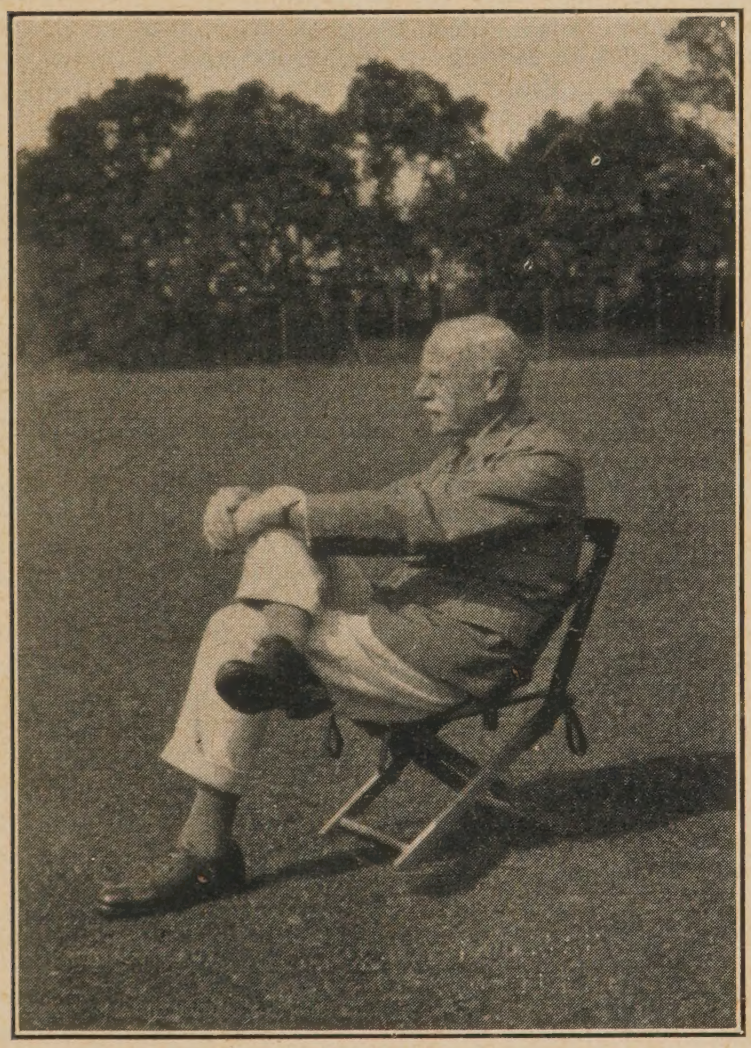
years of treasured association with him, I now look back on my first impressions. As a junior houseman, one was a little quizzical about how often and to how many he gave detailed instructions about an incoming patient. Things rarely went wrong, and I have often thought in later years how wise he was to take those precautions. This same attention to detail permeated his whole life whether at work or play. In writing a paper, every detail was carefully scrutinized, and every reference checked and verified at the source. This sometimes necessitated visits to distant libraries and always entailed many consultations with the staffs of the world's leading libraries. The result is that Dr. Birkett's bibliographies are outstanding for completeness and accuracy.

He wisely took a summer holiday of at least two months with his family. In his early years this holiday was spent down the lower St. Lawrence River, but during the past thirty years, in England and Europe, except for the last few years of his mother's life when he refused to be far away from her. He made more than eighty Atlantic crossings. The annual visit abroad was more than a holiday. Each time a new area was chosen and all the important medical centres therein were visited. One year it might be France, another, the Scandinavian countries, or the Low Countries or Austria and Hungary, but always with London as a base. In this way he kept himself constantly up to date and was one of the best informed practitioners in the world. No one travelled more regularly to all the important world centres of medicine. When he returned from one trip, preparations were immediately made for the next.

Fearlessness and lack of false pride were outstanding qualities. When convinced that he was right, he went ahead indifferent to public opinion. He had none of the small boy's false modesty which many of us carry into manhood, and which makes one hesitate to do the right thing because others may not do likewise or may criticize. A simple illustration of this was his attitude towards dress. He was always faultlessly attired. His criterion was "what should be worn" and not "what will be worn". This same attitude served him in his profession and contributed to success and long life. In dealing with a patient he made up his mind what was the best course to follow; then he went ahead fearlessly, without further worry, and with no useless recriminations. He gave of his best and used none of his energy in wasteful indecision. Because of this, his operative work, no matter how long and exacting the procedure, took no more energy than was absolutely necessary for the task, and tired him surprisingly little.

Meeting Dr. Birkett was always a pleasant occasion as his greeting was so warm and genuine. In a gathering at his home he managed to have a little time for everyone and particularly for any children present. He gained their confidence at once and they instinctively ran to him. After visiting him professionally, the child came away with the doctor as a firm friend, and anticipating rather than fearing future meetings.

In the hospital the universality of his greeting cheered all alike. Outstanding victories of the football team organized by the Royal Victoria Hospital orderlies were the occasion of congratulatory cables from him while in Europe during the summer. He was concerned about his housemen's off-time and contributed much to their enjoyment. His loyalty to his friends was one of his endearing characteristics. In his care and devotion to patients he made no distinction between the poor and the rich; each received his best. Honesty was a main feature of both his professional and private life.



Herbert Stanley Birkett

Having taken a long summer holiday, he took very little time off the remainder of the year. He was an early riser, always commenced his operations at eight a.m., and retired early. He kept to a very strict regimen; he lived simply, but he entertained his friends royally. In his busy day, he managed regular medical reading. He bought every medical book published which pertained to his specialty. He accumulated a splendid library, which he donated and housed in the McGill Medical Library in order to make it available to his confrères.

He enjoyed remarkably good health throughout his life. This was reflected in his happy cheerful disposition. He was always dignified. He never scolded, but he maintained strict discipline. He was intolerant of carelessness or inefficiency. He loved teaching. His lectures to the students were carefully prepared and generously interspersed with illustrations and demonstrations of pathological and clinical material. As a teacher for forty years, his door was ever open to the students, in whom he always had a kindly interest. Making hospital rounds with him was always a profitable experience. He had a keen intellect, a retentive memory, and was an ardent student. He was a perfectionist. He was an organizer, and as a younger man gave much time to organized medicine. For many years he served as Secretary and later as Vice-President of the Canadian Medical Association and of the Montreal Medico-Chirurgical Society.

He had an extensive knowledge of Internal Medicine and understood the use of drugs thoroughly. Because of his frequent visits to other medical centres, he was abreast of the modern developments in surgery, but he was always a conservative surgeon. It was the conservatism of judgment, of knowledge and of experience, which always stood him in good stead throughout his career. In 1906 Dr. Birkett introduced bronchoscopy into Canada, also septal re-section, the Killian radical operation on the frontal sinus, and radiography of the mastoids and of the nasal accessory sinuses. He was the first to perform in Canada thyrotomy for malignant disease of the larynx in 1893.

He had a deep interest in medical history and contributed many valuable papers on the subject, namely, "The Early History of Medicine in the Province of Quebec"; "The Early History of British Otology"; "The History of Otology in Canada" (in collaboration with Professor Politzer); "The Transatlantic Development of Rhino-Laryngology"; "A Short Account of the History of Medicine in Lower Canada".

He belonged to the leading international and national Medical Societies on both sides of the Atlantic. He was a regular attendant at meetings. He was a splendid chairman. He never allowed a meeting to get out of hand, and yet he controlled it with very little apparent effort. He served in an official capacity in most of these societies.

In addition to the many qualities already cited, which contributed to Dr. Birkett's ultimate success, I feel that he profited by being given important positions early in his career. He was given responsibility when he was young enough to bring the breadth of vision and the daring of early manhood to his duties. His training finished, he returned to Montreal in 1889. He was immediately appointed Laryngologist to the Montreal Dispensary and in 1890 he joined the Laryngological Staff of the Montreal General Hospital. The very next year, his third in practice, he was appointed Chief of the Department. In 1894, five years after commencing practice, he was made Professor and Head of the Department of Laryngology at McGill University. In 1898, he was invited to organize the

department of Laryngology at the newly opened Royal Victoria Hospital. In 1906, after the death of Dr. Buller, he persuaded the Governors and the Medical Board to amalgamate the Ear, and the Nose and Throat departments into the Department of Otolaryngology. The same arrangement was made at McGill University, so that from 1906 he was Professor of Otolaryngology at McGill, and Chief of the Department of Oto-laryngology at the Royal Victoria Hospital until his retirement in 1932. He then became an Emeritus Professor at the University and a Consultant at the Royal Victoria Hospital, positions which he held until his death.

He was an active member of the medical staffs and consultant to the following hospitals, the Alexandra Hospital for Infectious Diseases, the Children's Memorial Hospital, the Montreal Foundling and Baby Hospital. He was Otolaryngologist to the MacKay Institute for the Deaf, and latterly had been President and Honorary President of that Institute. He was a Life-Governor of the Montreal General Hospital from 1887.

Similarly in organized medicine he held many prominent positions. He was four times Vice-President of the Section of Laryngology and Otology of the British Medical Association. He was President of the Montreal Medico-Chirurgical Society in 1903, and President of the American Laryngological Association in 1907. He was made an honorary member of the Italian Laryngological, Rhinological and Otological Society in 1907.

His military promotions came rapidly. He joined the Third Victoria Rifles of Canada as Surgeon-Lieutenant in 1887, and in 1894 he was a Surgeon-Major. He enjoyed telling a story on himself about his arrival at Aldershot, England, to perfect himself in Army Medicine. He was told to report next morning to the Parade Ground. The officer in charge of the parade was junior in rank to Major Birkett and out of courtesy he handed over the command to the visitor. In fear and trembling, Major Birkett gave the order to march. The whole field advanced on him and piled up on a nearby fence before the parade director came to his assistance and relieved him of the command. He then went to the Commanding Officer, confessed his ignorance, and asked permission to join the ranks for training from the ground up. On his return to Canada, he laid the foundations for the present Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. In connection with the Victoria Rifles, he organized the first fully qualified regimental stretcher section in Canada. In 1900 he also organized and commanded No. 3 Bearer Company and No. 3 Field Hospital. By 1904 he was principal Medical Officer for M.D. 4, and in that year he retired from the Militia with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. In 1909 he was President of the Association of Medical Officers of the Canadian Militia. It is fitting that at the time of his death he was Honorary Colonel of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps.

It is important to note that he occupied all these positions within twenty years from graduation and when he was less than forty-two years of age. Naturally, he brought to all these tasks his innate ability and his thorough training, but in addition he had the confidence which comes from early recognition.

In the next thirty years the medical world reaped the harvest which had been sown in the previous twenty. In 1914, he became Dean of Medicine, at McGill University, a position which he held until 1922 (five years of this time he was serving with the Canadian Army overseas). In 1921, on the occasion of the Centenary of McGill University, he was given the degree of Honorary Doctor of Laws. In 1922, he was invited by the University of London to give the annual Semon Lecture in Otolaryngology. He was made an Honorary Member of the Scottish Otological and Laryngological Society in 1924, and of the German Ear, Nose and Throat Society in 1938. He was Honorary President of the Clinical Congress of Laryngology in London in 1919, and in the same year he was Vice-President of the Otological Section of the Royal Society of Medicine. He was a member of the American Bronchoscopic and Esophagological Society, and of the International Collegium of Otolaryngology. In 1913, he was Vice-President of the Otological Section of the International Congress of Medicine. He was President of the American Laryngological, Rhinological, and Otological Society in 1919, and President of the American Otological Society in 1922. In 1927, he was the first member to be a Guest of Honour of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology. He was founder and first chairman of the Otolaryngological Section of the Montreal Medico-Chirurgical Society in 1933. In 1935 and 1938 he was Vice-President of the Pan-American Congress. In 1936 he was the representative of the Dominion of Canada at the International Congress of Otolaryngology in Berlin.

His progress in Military Medicine was equally brilliant. In 1914, he organized and commanded No. 3 Canadian General Hospital (McGill), the first to be organized by any University and the first to take the field. He was promoted to full Colonel. In 1916, he was appointed Consultant Otolaryngologist to the British Armies in the Boulogne area. He was twice mentioned in dispatches by Field-Marshall Sir Douglas Haig in 1916 and 1917. In 1918 he was made Assistant Director-General, Canadian Army Medical Services Overseas with the rank of Brigadier-General. In 1917, he was created a Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath (Military). He was also awarded the Colonial Officers' Auxiliary Forces Decoration in 1916, and the Jubilee Medal in 1935. He was Honorary Physician and Aide-de-Camp to the Governors-General of Canada, Lord Byng of Vimy and Viscount Willingdon, 1921-1931.

Dr. Birkett was always interested in raising the standard of special training in Otolaryngology. He presented a paper on "The Education of the Specialist in Laryngology and Otology" by invitation before the

British Medical Association. He did everything he could to encourage and to make it possible for his students to equip themselves properly for the specialty. He was particularly insistent on a thorough grounding in the basic sciences of pathology, physiology, and anatomy. He encouraged his students to travel abroad, and he used his vast influence to provide the open door for these students wherever they went on the continent or in England. Many of my happiest recollections of my years in Europe are connected with Dr. Birkett's friends, who after his kind introduction, later became my friends.

Dr. Birkett had not been in good health for the past 18 months and he died on July 19, 1942, two days after his 78th birthday. There were occasions when he suffered intensely, and, yet through it all, he never failed to be more concerned for those looking after him than for himself. He always had a word of thanks or greeting. Fortunately, his mind was clear to the last and he was able to enjoy the unselfish and tireless devotion of his wife and daughter.

For Dr. Birkett death came as the fulfilment of an ever abundant life, for his family and friends it is an irreparable loss.

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